



Solving the Wrong Problem? A Practitioners' Method for Campaigning in Irregular Warfare

By retired colonels Montgomery Erfourth, Paul Burton, Brian Petit, Jeremiah Monk, and Dr. John A. Pennell, all of the Irregular Warfare Center.

Monte Erfourth is a contractor with the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC). He is an instructor at the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU). He is a retired U.S. Army Colonel (FA59 strategist) and former Marine officer with more than 30 years of experience. He is the author of two books and more than one hundred articles on strategy, irregular warfare, and great power competition.

Paul Burton, a retired U.S. Army colonel (Special Forces), is currently a contractor with the Irregular Warfare Center. He is the senior Irregular Warfare instructor in the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. He served in non-conflict countries as well as combat zones, and he's deployed to more than 40 countries.

Brian Petit, a retired U.S. Army colonel (Special Forces), is currently a contractor with the Irregular Warfare Center. He teaches and consults on strategy, planning, special operations, and resistance and the Joint Special Operations University.

Jeremiah Monk, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel, is currently a contractor with the Irregular Warfare Center. He is one of the leading design practitioners in the U.S. Special Operations community. He previously served as USSOCOM Chief of Plans and Strategic Design and instructed at the Joint Special Operations University.

Dr. John A. Pennell is a contractor with the Irregular Warfare Center (IWC), serving as the Editor-in-Chief of PRISM: The Journal of Complex Operations. He's also a former U.S. Senior Foreign Service Officer (Minister-Counselor) with more than 20 years of field experience in every region of the world including in combat and hybrid warfare zones.

Introduction

Among the five of us who teach the Irregular Warfare Center's (IWC) advanced campaigning course (IW401), we have spent a long time watching capable people lose slowly. Not only on the battlefield, where American units almost always prevailed, but in the space above it, where campaigns are designed and where conflicts are so often lost prematurely. The wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan are examples of this -- in each

case the United States fielded the stronger force and still walked away short of what it set out to achieve. The comfortable explanation is that we executed poorly, and that a little more resolve or a few more resources would have turned the result. Between us we have written numerous campaign plans, in enough joint and combatant command headquarters, as well as interagency strategies at a U.S. embassy, to have reached a less comfortable conclusion. The recurring American failure in irregular warfare and conflict was seldom a failure of execution. Rather, it was the confident pursuit of the wrong problem.

That is harder to admit, because it implicates how we think rather than how we fight. We are good at

fighting. We are less practiced at the slower work that comes before the fighting and continues long after it: understanding a challenge well enough to act on it, agreeing on whose challenge it even is, and stringing years of small actions into a position of advantage.

Those three tasks are the real substance of campaigning below the level of armed conflict, and no single idea covers all three. What follows is our attempt to put them in an order a planner can carry into the room and use under pressure. It grew out of the IWC's IW401 course and out of the decades the five of us spent watching good plans fail for reasons that had nothing to do with the quality of the troops.

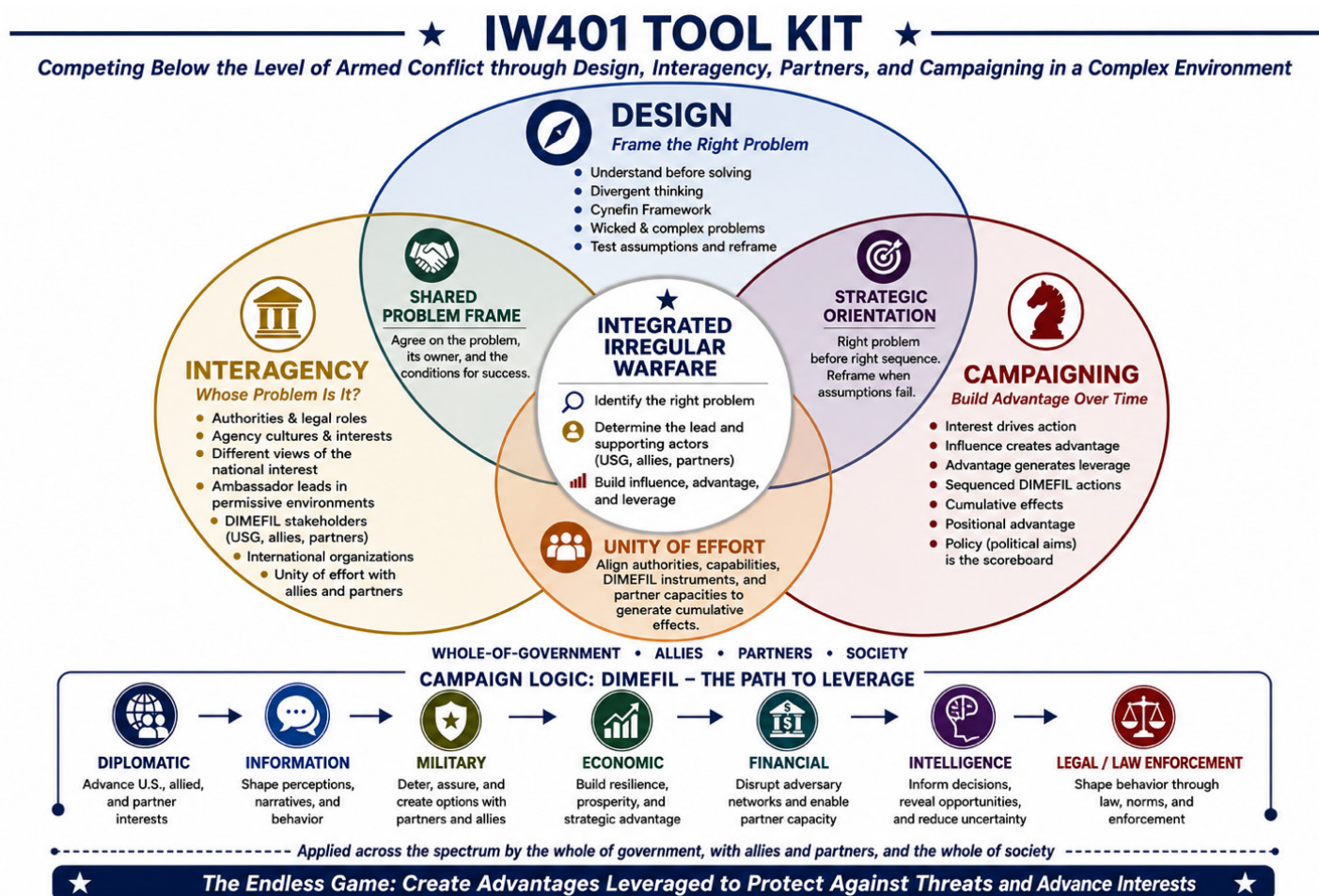


Figure. The three braided disciplines of campaigning. Design frames the right problem, the interagency sorts out who owns it, and campaigning builds advantage over time. Where the disciplines overlap, they produce a shared problem frame, strategic orientation, and unity of effort, converging on integrated irregular warfare and carried by the DIMEFIL instruments of national power.

Planning Is Not Strategy

Start with the tool we reach for first and trust the most: the joint planning process and its familiar logic of ends, ways, and means. That model is far from useless. It organizes work, aligns resources, and gives a staff a shared vocabulary. But it quietly encourages a potential mistake. It lets the planner fill in the boxes, call the result comprehensive, and never once say how any of it actually causes the outcome he wants. Ends, ways, and means describe a plan. They do not, by themselves, contain a theory of why an adversary or a target population will act in a manner necessary to achieve our objectives. We have each sat through campaign designs where a staff produced a polished line-of-effort chart, briefed it with real conviction, and then could not answer a simple question when it was finally asked: why will this cause anyone to behave differently? The chart described what we would do. It never explained why any of it would work. That gap, between activity and causation, is where irregular campaigns quietly go wrong.

The deeper trouble is that the ends-ways-means model assumes an endpoint. You define the desired end state, then plan backward from it. That works when there is a victory to plan toward. In irregular warfare a specific end to hostilities is not necessarily easily achieved, seen, or may even occur. [Joint Doctrine Note 1-19](#) describes a competition continuum rather than a world that sits at peace until it flips to war, and the [Joint Concept for Competing](#) goes further, borrowing Kissinger's line that the goal is less victory than persistent strategic progress. A contest with no final whistle cannot be planned backward from a whistle that never blows. It demands a continuous way of thinking, not a document you finish and file. And because it runs in a straight line from plan to execution, it forgets that in a complex environment the moment we act the environment reacts, throwing off new variables the plan never considered; hold to the original script and the effort slides from irrelevant to counterproductive, the door-to-door hunt for insurgents that ends up alienating the locals and manufacturing the very fighters it meant to remove.

This is where the mental model matters most. Some problems are clear or merely complicated. They yield to expertise and process, and once you understand them you can plan the solution with confidence. Other problems are complex. In them, as David Snowden and Mary Boone argued in their [work on the Cynefin framework](#), cause and effect can be seen only in hindsight, and the act of understanding the problem is inseparable from the act of solving it. Irregular warfare lives among these harder problems. When we treat a complex problem as though it were only complicated, we rush. We bring the confidence that suits a complicated problem to a situation that punishes confidence, and we end up applying a well-built solution to a problem we never actually had. Design -- the discipline of framing the right problem before trying to solve it -- exists to guard against exactly that rush.

Winning Is a Position, Not an Endpoint

If there is no final victory to plan toward, what are we trying to achieve? The honest answer is a position of advantage, held long enough to protect our interests while we advance them.

Total victory of the traditional, more conventional, kind is rarer and more fragile than our instincts suggest. Versailles set the stage for 1939. The German and Japanese surrenders of 1945 gave way to the Cold War within months. Even a decisive military win tends to open the next contest rather than close the account. So, the campaigner should stop chasing the knockout and start building position, because from a superior position every instrument of national power works better, our options multiply, and the competitor's shrink. Advantage of this kind is not a trophy you win and keep. It behaves more like a window that opens and closes as conditions change. It cannot be banked, only renewed, which is precisely why competition never ends.

It also helps to remember that cooperation, competition, and armed conflict are not neat phases in a sequence. Rather, they typically coexist. The United States and China, for example, compete militarily in the western Pacific

while cooperating on trade. Thus, the same rivalry can sit in quiet cooperation on one issue amid open confrontation on another in the same week. [JDN 1-19](#) puts this in doctrine: the continuum runs from cooperation through competition below armed conflict to armed conflict, and a campaign is almost always operating in more than one of those conditions at once. The campaigner's task is to read which condition holds, with whom, and on which issue, and to act accordingly, rather than force an entire relationship into a single frame.

Underneath all of this an engine runs, and it runs in a fixed order. Interests drive the pursuit of influence. Influence, the capacity to cause effects by indirect means, accumulates into advantage. Advantage is superiority of position, and advantage applied becomes leverage. Leverage realized is an effect: a change in what another actor decides to do. The [Joint Concept for Competing](#) describes this same chain when it calls on the joint force to gain influence, advantage, and leverage over its rivals. The order is not decorative. A campaign that tries to apply leverage it has not earned is writing checks against an empty account. And influence, advantage, and leverage behave like a finite form of capital. They are slow and costly to earn, quick to spend, and hard or impossible to rebuild once spent. The planner who internalizes that will husband them the way a careful person husbands savings and will be suspicious of any plan that spends the whole balance at once for a single dramatic effect.

Building position turns on a handful of variables the planner has to hold in view at the same time. Time and space define where and when advantage can be built, but space here means far more than terrain. It runs through domains, through the seams between commands, and through the minds of populations and leaders. A capable competitor deliberately chooses ground where American strengths do not apply or that falls outside the artificial regional boundaries we draw on our own maps and then mistake for the world. Time is a weapon of its own. Windows open and close, and the actor with the longer horizon usually sets the terms. In response, the planner must set the enabling conditions early, because authorities, access, and partner trust all carry long lead times

and cannot be conjured in a crisis. Then the planner should arrange small critical actions, so the pile becomes a position, but resist the urge to grade a cumulative campaign by the standards of a step-by-step one. If the planner grades it this way, he will conclude that nothing is happening, right up until the moment the accumulated advantage announces itself.

One correction to our instincts belongs here. In irregular warfare, effects tend to be changes in behavior, not body counts. Most of the work is cumulative; a great many small actions compounding into position rather than a single decisive blow we can point to and measure. That is uncomfortable for an institution trained to count things, but it is the nature of the contest.

Whose Problem Is It?

The second task is the one most planners least like to discuss, because it cannot be solved with a better plan. Whose problem is it?

Below the level of armed conflict, the military rarely owns the problem. In a particular country, the U.S. Ambassador is the primary lead for U.S. actions, influence, and interests in the country to which they are assigned while the military supports. Perhaps to the chagrin of most Americans in service of foreign affairs, the U.S. government (USG) does not plan or act as a single body. In fact, whose problem it is depends on a crowded field of actors, and the interagency is an artifice that mentally crowds agencies together as a unified power unit. The USG interagency itself is not a place you can visit or a headquarters you can task. Rather, it is a process of people and rival organizations with different cultures, readings of the national interest, authorities and funding sources, let alone competing interests typically resulting in turf battles. Knowing who owns a given problem, what each actor can lawfully and culturally do, and where the friction sits among them is a discipline, and it is every bit as demanding as operational design.

Anyone who has worked in or as a member of a U.S. embassy country team understand this context. The defense attaché, the political

officer, the intelligence element, and the visiting combatant-command planner can each be competent, well-intentioned, and pulling in a slightly different direction, every one of them answering to a different chain and a different definition of success. Title 10 and Title 22 authorities meet at the embassy but do not always shake hands. None of that friction is a defect to be engineered away. It is the environment, and a campaign that pretends otherwise is planning for a process and institutional structure that does not exist.

This is also where campaigns most often come apart. The three tasks -- framing the problem, sorting out who owns it, and building advantage over time -- braid together only when they share one thing: a common and tested understanding of the problem. Agencies will not unite around a campaign until they agree on one diagnosis and one owner. The campaign cannot be sequenced well until design has named the right problem. And because the problem is complex and the adversary adapts, that shared understanding is never finished; it must be revised repeatedly as the contest teaches us, we were partly wrong. The first move of any serious campaign, then, is not to generate options. It is to reach a diagnosis the whole team actually owns, and to keep re-earning it.

A Method That Learns

None of this works as a fixed script. If the problem keeps shifting and the shared understanding keeps getting revised, the campaign needs a way of running that treats learning as the main activity rather than an afterthought. We teach it as a causal-adaptive method, and it runs as a cycle rather than a plan.

It begins by understanding the real challenge, separating the human and political dynamics from the bureaucratic labels we lay over them, and doing that work jointly so the interagency owns the diagnosis from the start. Next comes the triage the Cynefin distinction demands: is this problem complicated, where deliberate planning fits, or complex, where iterative design is required? Get that judgment wrong and everything downstream inherits the error. From there the team builds a

theory of the challenge, mapping root causes, proximate causes, and effects into a causal chain, so that intervention aims at the points where the system can actually be moved rather than at whatever happens to be easiest to reach.

The next step is the one most staffs skip, and it is the one that separates strategy from planning. The team develops rival theories of success, each a testable claim about how a specific set of actions will shift the system toward advantage. More than one, deliberately, because a strategy can only be judged against an alternative, and a plan with no rival is usually just a preference wearing a uniform. Each candidate is then stress-tested through a theory of failure: a structured pre-mortem that surfaces the assumptions the theory depends on, anticipates how a thinking adversary will adapt, and defines in advance the indicators that would warn us the theory is failing while there is still time to change course.

Then, and only then, comes action, and even action is built to teach. Rather than execute a fixed script, leaders launch several safe-to-fail experiments at once. They probe, sense, and respond, watching the indicators, investing in what works, divesting from what does not, and converting failure into information rather than treating it as a verdict on someone's career.

Every action produces new information that feeds a revised theory, and the cycle turns again. Running through all of it is a hub of constant empathy and engagement with the actors in play, and a set of enabling foundations that must be present at every step: whole-of-government integration, allied co-design, honest use of data and intelligence, legal and policy alignment, and disciplined strategic communication. The [Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning](#) points the same way when it treats campaigns as continuous and integrated rather than episodic and narrowly military.

Why This Fits Irregular Warfare

The method serves conventional campaigning equally well. But it fits irregular warfare for three specific reasons worth stating plainly. First,

irregular warfare is decided in the human and cognitive domain. It is the old contest for hearts and minds under a newer name, and a method that places understanding people at its center, which is built for that fight rather than retrofitted to it. Second, the approach does not depend on violence as its primary means. It works through influence, presence, partners, and narrative, with force more often held in reserve than spent, which is precisely the posture that [DoD Instruction 3000.07](#) and the [Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy](#) describe. Third, it is built for a contest that never ends, where advantage compounds slowly and the side that keeps learning faster than its opponent can reverse its gains is the side that holds position over time.

A Different Way of Thinking

We are not offering a better plan, and that is the point. The institutions we serve do not lack planning capacity; if anything, we have too much faith in it. What we have lacked, over and over, is a way of thinking honest enough to admit when a problem is complex and disciplined enough to hold several theories at once, and patient enough

to build advantage rather than chase victory. None of this is exotic. Most of it already lives in doctrine we own and seldom read the way it was meant to be read. Our history is replete with Cold War examples of this application.

The next time a capable staff sets out to lose slowly, it will most likely be for the same reason as the last time: a confident answer to a question no one stopped to frame. The method here will not make irregular warfare easy. Nothing will. But it may keep us from rushing, with all our considerable strength, at the wrong problem one more time.

The authors are the course designers and instructors of the IWC's IW401 course, "Integrated Interagency Irregular Warfare Campaign Design" course. If this article and way of thinking are of interest to you, learn more about the course and register for it at this [link](#).

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